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# The domestication of Ford Model T in Denmark

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By Michael F. Wagner, Institute for History and Social Studies, Aalborg University

Ford Motor Company started to operate on a commercial level in Denmark from 1907 by appointing a sales agent, Bülow & Co., as importer of Ford automobiles to the Scandinavian market. The major breakthrough for the company on a global scale came with the introduction of the Model T by the end of 1908. This turned Ford Motor Company into a multinational corporation with branches in many countries. In terms of Americanisation the Danish market and the Danish consumers were exposed to many of the same mechanisms Ford generally used to conquer the national automobile markets outside the US. But in other respects the Danish case shows some more unique traits in this process of domesticating the American automobile in the European market. This concerns the employment of means of soft as well as hard power in the Americanisation of the Danish culture of automobilism. And it concerns cultural imperialism as a push and pull mechanism working through the introduction, appropriation and incorporation of a national cultural context around Ford, what in other terms could be described as “self-Americanization”.<sup>1</sup>

In theoretical terms the domestication of a technology may be seen as the process through which an artefact becomes associated with practices, meanings, people and other artefacts in the construction of intersecting large and small networks. Domestication can be seen as a process where consumption is linked to invention and design, and to the public framing of technologies as symbolic objects of desire. This means that the domestication process can be studied at a household/market level as well as on a national/transnational level. Domestication of a certain technology may consist of five stages: 1) A phase of imagination, where the product is introduced to the consumers as a vision rather than an accessible hardware, here it lives in the imagination only; 2) A phase of appropriation where the product is made available to the consumer; 3) A phase of objectification where the product is displayed in public and infused with meaning; 4) A phase of incorporation where the functional aspects of the product is in the forefront; 5) A phase of

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<sup>1</sup> Mel van Elteren: *Americanism and Americanization. A Critical History of Domestic and Global Influence*. London, 2006; U.S. Cultural Imperialism Today: Only a Chimera? *SAIS Review*, vol. XXIII, no. 2, 2003.

conversion where the product is incorporated into everyday life and almost taken for granted by the general public.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of the paper is two sided. One perspective is the domesticating activities of Ford Motor Company as a promoter of Fordism and generally doing things the American way. The other perspective is on the receiving end and has its focus on the reactions from the Danish partners, politicians, workers and trade unions etc. to these American methods of business that were pushed directly from the Dearborn Headquarters. Also in question here is how the consumers were targeted and approached by the Danish sales agent and his dealers when they implemented these new business methods, and finally what were the reactions to this from the consumers. The answers to these questions will imply that the domestication of Ford in Denmark was conducted with both hard and soft push mechanisms and received with soft pull mechanisms by the general public and the consumer.

## Selling the Ford

In 1907 the Danish sales agent Bülow & Co. sold only 12 Ford automobiles. At this time the total number of cars in the country was 207. The commercial breakthrough for the sales agent came with the arrival of the new Ford Model T by the end of 1908. In 1909 the company sold 32 cars. By then the son C.A. Bülow had travelled around the country intensely to present the new model to the dealers and in 1913 sales reached 109. This is definitely the domesticating phase of Ford as an imagination, appropriation and objectification. In an article in *MOTOR Magazine* from 1909 the editor would openly confess his reluctance to present the Model T to the readers because it appeared to be to slight and fragile. But the last years experience with the new automobile had more than proved that the model T was a very reliable and strong car, so "this was the right moment to direct the attention of the large motor-interested public to this unique construction".<sup>3</sup> During W.W. I Bülow & Co. were able to supply the market up until 1917 with automobiles produced in Manchester and during the last year he sold 220 cars to Danish costumers. From 1917 the gasoline was rationed and Danish automobilism suffered hard from the shortage of fuel for the rest of the war.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Knut H. Sørensen: Domestication: the enactment of technology; Roger Silverstone: Domesticating domestication. Reflections on the life of a concept. In Thomas Berker, et.aal (eds.): *Domestication of Media and Technology*. Glasgow, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *MOTOR*, 1909, p. 304.

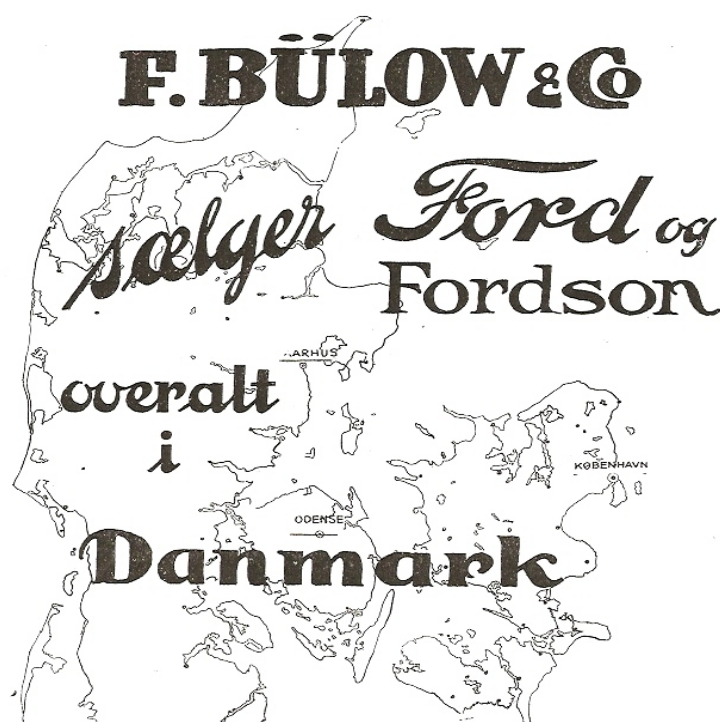
<sup>4</sup> Peter Sørensen, Jesper Strandskov, Kurt Pedersen, Per Boje: Ford Denmark and the Scandinavian Market: From regional exportbase to periphery. In Hubert Bonin, Yannick Lung, Steven Tolliday, (eds.): *Ford. The European History 1903-2003*. Paris, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 267-319. This is the most detailed article on Ford in Denmark and contains much of the concrete information about the Company presented in this paper. Unfortunately, the article has no reflections of the question of Americanism and Americanization at all.

# MOTOR

Nr. 47

19. NOVEMBER 1921

XVI Aarg.



*Bülow & Co is selling Ford and Fordson everywhere in Denmark*

By the time when Ford Motor Company opened an assembly factory in Copenhagen in 1919 things began to happen fast in the automobile business. Bülow & Co. had already established Ford as a popular and well known brand through efficient marketing strategies. Three months every year the company would run full page advertisements in the MOTOR magazine that was published to all the members of FDM (United Danish Motor Owners). In return for this the editor would publish positive articles about Henry Ford the man and the Model T. An early example of the appropriation of Danish national symbols to create a cultural context around Ford was an article in MOTOR in 1914 where Henry Ford was compared to Hans Christian Andersen and described as 'the greatest narrator of fairytales in the World' next to him. The purpose of the article was to celebrate the introduction of the five dollar day in all of Fords factories. Marketing the Ford model T. also included expositions at the regular automobile fairs held every year, presenting the car to the public through nationwide touring campaigns with huge processions of Ford automobiles, and also the participation in automobile rallies all over the country was efficiently employed to make the Ford brand known to the general public.<sup>5</sup>

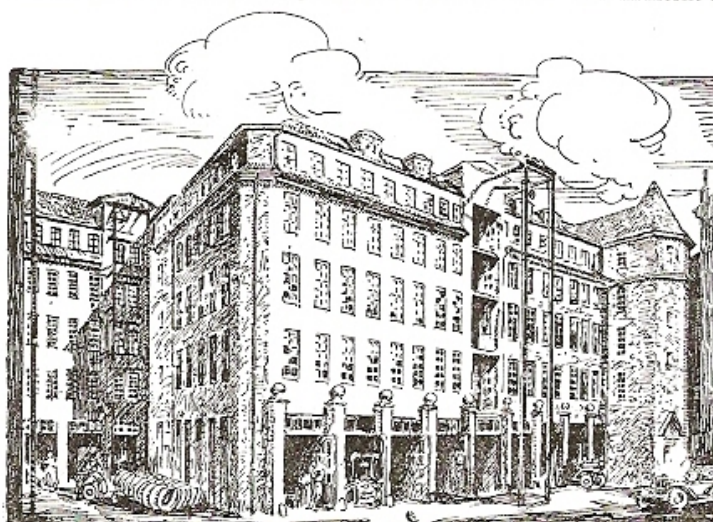
<sup>5</sup> 'Ford'. Et Automobil-Æventyr. *MOTOR*, 1914, p. 56.

By 1923 Bülow & Co. could announce that they were building a very large new Headquarter in Copenhagen. Behind the commercial success of the firm was a large net of car dealers and repair shops spread over the country for the distribution, maintenance and service of Ford automobiles. By the end of the decade Ford had even introduced the standard service system with a flat rate wage system for the mechanics, and fixed prices for every type of repair of the Ford automobile dictated from Dearborn. During the 1920ies Ford Motor Company tried twice to implement this standard system for the repair shops on a global scale, but the 'Fordization' of the service system was unsuccessful, became rigid and much too expensive to the consumers so it turned out to be a failure in the end.<sup>6</sup>

## Et nyt Automobil-Palads i København.

Der er ikke noget fornøjeligere og mere oplivende end fra den første svage og usikre Begyndelse at være med i og kæmpe for et nyt Fremskridt, som stadigt vokser og vinder i Styrke og Anseelse. Derfor er det

gamle, men  
bytte af at se  
mange praktis  
Det er paa  
nes store Gru  
retningsbygning  
Bag den karal  
som bekendt  
har Arkitekt ?



*A new Automobile – Palace in Copenhagen: The Headquarter of Bülow & Co.*

In 1923 a recession hit the Ford Motor Company hard and forced it to shift commercial strategy in an attempt to press more profit out of the retail system. The same year General Motor had opened a large assembly factory in Copenhagen and competition was intensified. When Dearborn started to press very hard for a larger share of investments and risk to be placed on the shoulders of the national representative and his dealers, this was met with sharp opposition from the Danish dealer. Infuriated by what they saw as a severe disapproval after many years of loyal and faithful service on January 19, 1924 Bülow & Co. resigned from their contract and shifted to what were soon to become Fords hardest competitor General Motors. The new building that was intended to be a palace for Ford automobiles now instead became a stronghold for selling Chevrolet, Buick and Cadillac thanks to this outburst of a moral economy.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen L. McIntyre: The Failure of Fordism. Reform of the Automobile Repair Industry, 1913-1940. *Technology & Culture*, Apr. 2000; 41,2.

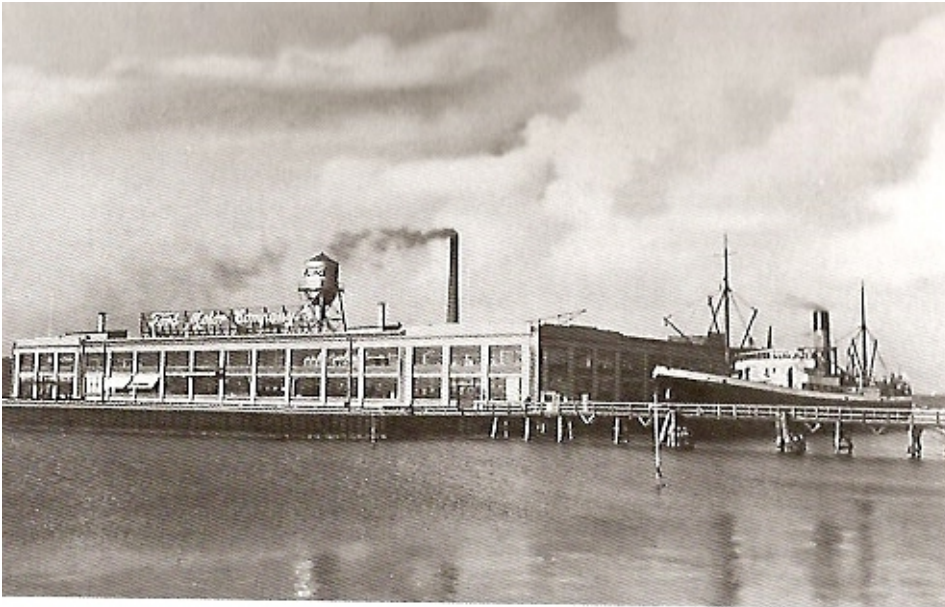
To Ford Motor Company this was all strictly business matters and did not involve taking decisions based on any moral feelings the way the Europeans tended to. So now Ford were now able to implement these American methods of business in Denmark to a much larger extent than before, and immediately started to develop a whole new network of dealers in Denmark that were operating on a highly competitive level. Also a whole new (American) system of financing the purchase of the car with deferred payment after a down payment together with a guarantee to buy the old used car back when a new one was purchased was introduced in Denmark. This new system also had to be financed by the dealers at their own risk. Ford Motor Company kept up the hard pressure and by the end of 1924 they had built a network of 84 dealers all over the country. But Ford knew how to use the carrot as well as the stick, so as an extra beneficiary the three best selling Ford dealers in the country would get an invitation to visit the River Rouge Plant in Dearborn in the year 1932.

### Producing the Ford Model T and pushing Fordism

In 1919 Ford Motor Company decided to make Denmark the centre of car production for the north European market and opened an assembly factory in Heimdalsgade in Copenhagen. Behind the plan to form a company and start a production of Model T was William S. Knudsen (1879-1948). He was a Dane by birth and had grown up in Copenhagen before he immigrated to USA and joined the Ford Motor Company in 1911. As the general production manager of the Model T he was responsible for the building and expansion of Fords factories, and he may have suggested Copenhagen as a base for production because he was familiar with the country and had made good connections here over the years. But Copenhagen also had a very good location and fine harbor facilities including a free port founded in the 1890ies with the intention to create a position as transit port between East and West. The country was politically very stable with only few social tensions unlike most of war ridden Europe. The Danish trade policy was also an important factor in the final decision because it allowed a customs tariff policy where automobile parts were only charged one tenth of the tariff on imported cars. Danish authorities also allowed cars - imported or manufactured here - to be re-exported to third countries tax free. Finally, it was important to the decision that the country had a high quality infrastructure and a highly skilled and disciplined labor force.

In June 1919 the Ford Motor Company A/S - Dansk Monteringsfabrik Aktieselskab was founded with a share capital of 500.000 Danish Kroner. The establishment of a separate company made it a genuine Danish business and this reduced any public curiosity in business affairs to a minimum. According to Danish legislation the founders of the company had to be Danes and the majority of the board of directors should be naturalized Danes and living in Denmark, But Knudsen made sure that Ford Headquarters remained in full control through share holding. On the management side Dearborn also had full control with the events, but at some points the managing directors had to compromise with Danish trade unionism and were even able to develop a network of subcontractors in Danish mechanical industries. The automobile parts to the assembly line production was from the beginning shipped from Dearborn instead of being delivered by local producers. But gradually Danish subcontractors were able and allowed to produce many of the spare parts for the north European Ford Model T So there were some kind of hybridization between hardcore Fordism and Danish traditions going on during the phase of incorporation.





*The new factory in the South Harbor of Copenhagen even had its own ships*

From the beginning there were 148 blue collar and 12 white collar workers employed in the Ford assembly factory. During the next couple of years the factory was expanded but it were never able to meet the growing demand for automobiles to the north European market. In 1924 the factory was replaced by a new state of the art factory built in the South Harbor of Copenhagen. It was a prestige project designed by architect Albert Kahn who had built all Fords factories to that point, and the construction work was entrusted to the renowned developer Monberg & Thorsen who built bridges all over the world at that time. When the factory in Heimdalsgade closed down there were 600 blue collar and 100 white collar workers here producing 140 cars a day at the maximum. This was nowhere near enough to cover the rising demand from the expanding north European market. In 1923 more than 8.000 automobiles had to be imported directly from USA. The planning of a new and larger factory began in 1921, and at an extraordinary general meeting of shareholders on November 5. 1923 it was decided to expand the share capital to 30.000.000 Danish kroner which must be considered a very large sum of capital compared to any other large Danish industry at that time. Even the largest industrial company the Shipyards of Burmeister & Wain could not match this enormous sum of share capital. This was an extraordinary display of international structural power, which in the words of van Elteren “is the movement of large amounts of capital between countries, in the form of direct foreign investment, short-term capital flows and long-term portfolio investment, which constrains and “conditions” the behavior of governments, firms, trade unions and other groups”.<sup>7</sup>

The economic, political and social impact of Ford Motor Companys massive operations in Denmark from 1919 onwards is hard to estimate. Two months previous to the opening of the new factory the daily newspaper *Politiken* suggested that 15.000 Danes were employed directly or indirectly in connection with Fords national business activities. As the new factory were opened 15. November 1924 it immediately became a show window for the American system of mass production and rationalization of industry. Henry Ford’s popularity had mushroomed the previous year when his first book *My Life and Work* was translated into Danish and sold in very large numbers, the press

<sup>7</sup> Mel van Elteren, Op. Cit. 2006, p.137.

would write only positive stories about Henry Ford and his business, and taken together with the many thousand Model Ts running on the Danish roads and the impressions of new factory this formed a highly efficient propaganda platform for Fordism. Henry Ford came to be on everybody's lips, throughout the political spectrum from conservatives to Socialdemocrats Fordism was a hot issue. A number of leading politicians including even the Socialdemocratic Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning participated in the opening of the new factory. It has been suggested lately that the Socialdemocratic party changed its ideology from Marxism to Fordism during this period, but this has not been systematically documented by researchers yet. But there are certain clear indications that Thorvald Stauning was heavily influenced by this type of Americanism as he would confess a couple of years later in a speech to the opening of the Limfjords Bridge in Aalborg in 1933: "When the proper place for the bridge was agreed upon, they (the city council) tore everything down, big and small, that was blocking the way. There is something American in this, something pleasant about it. (...) There is something strong and healthy about this. Since Aalborg laid this plan, I have respected Aalborg like no other city".<sup>8</sup>



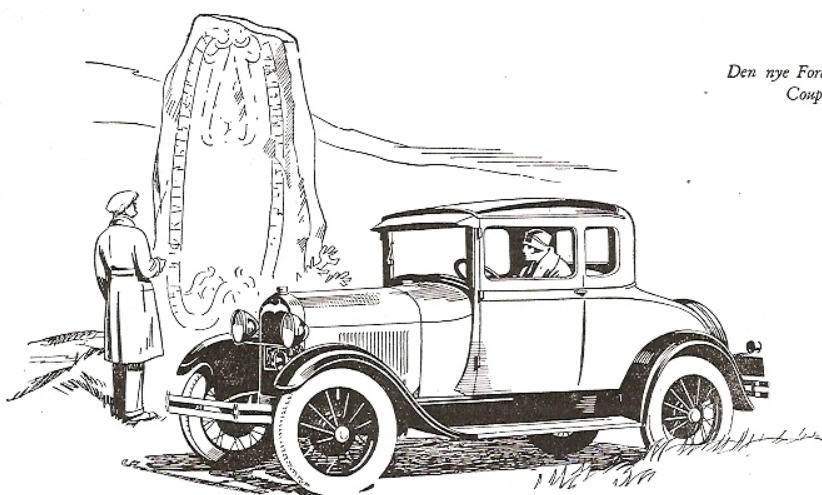
*The Mayor of Aalborg Marinus Jørgensen at the official opening of Vesterbro 16. September 1931*

Ford Motor Company A/S was nursing political connections and kept a close tie to influential persons and circles in Danish society. Symbolically it was the Lord Mayor of Copenhagen who had activated the conveyor belt in the new factory by a press on the button. The director of The Polytechnical University P.O. Pedersen (inventor of the telegraphone) even joined the board of

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<sup>8</sup> Bente Jensen: *Moderne gennembrud i Aalborg i 1930erne*. Aalborg, 2003, p. 76; Needles to stress, that the Socialdemocratic Mayor M. Jørgensen had driven in a brand new open Ford A borrowed from the local Ford dealer two years earlier when he had opened the new boulevard (the one in question) leading directly to the Limfjords Bridge. What was blocking the way and torn down was the old medieval centre of the city.





## Paa Højde med de dyreste Vogne — undtagen i Pris!

Den gamle Ford var bygget med det Formaal at give Millioner Lejlighed til at eje et Automobil. Den nye Ford er fremstillet, for at Millioner kan erhverve en Kvalitetsvogn.

*I Dag* stilles der de største Krav til Acceleration. Den nye Ford konkurrerer heri med Verdens dyreste Vogne: Fra 8 til 40 km paa 8 1/2 Sekund.

*I Dag* forlanger man den største Sikkerhed. Den nye Ford har fortrinlige Firchjulsbremses og er forsynet med splintsikker Vindskærm.

*I Dag* kræver man Hurtighed og jævn Kørsel. Den nye Ford kører hurtigere og, udstyret med hydrauliske Støddæmpere, mere støt end nogen anden Vogn af samme Pris-klasse.

Ford satte sig ikke for at bygge en ny Vogn, som skulde kunne sælges til den eller den Pris. Han bestemte sig for den Vogn, han vilde bygge, og fandt derefter Udveje til at fremstille den til en lav Pris.

Henvend Dem til den nærmeste aut. Ford Forhandler og lad ham give Dem alle nærmere Oplysninger.

ROADSTER Kr. 2625. — PHAETON Kr. 2625. — COUPÉ Kr. 3250.  
TUDOR SEDAN Kr. 3250. — SPORTS COUPÉ Kr. 3475. — FORDOR SEDAN Kr. 3575.  
Kofanger..... Kr. 80. — Bagsæde (for Roadster og Coupé)..... Kr. 160.

F. o. b. København.

# FORD

FORD MOTOR COMPANY A/S — KØBENHAVN

*The Ford Model T was associated with various historic icons in the advertisements. Here the car is parked next to the biggest Jellinge Sten a rune stone with an inscription that mentions 'Denmark' for the first time in history around 950. Today it is on UNESCOs Worlds Heritage list.*

managers of the company, but it was merely window dressing, as Dearborn kept everything under close control while the new factory was spewing out a new Model T every ten minutes. This increased the output of cars drastically and in November 6. 1926 Ford Model T number 100.000 rolled off the assembly line. This was celebrated before the car was sent on a nationwide promotion tour as the tangible proof of the American industrial marvel, in the Company's own words the Ford automobile had become: "an important wheel in every branch of industry and business life. It has given access to the highways for the great public of the middleclass, enhanced the productivity of

every trade, abolished the isolated life of the farmer and increased the market opportunities for the businessman".<sup>9</sup>

By august 1927 the production of Model T stopped for good and the new factory lay idle for the next nine months while the whole production line was re-mastered to fit the production of the new Model A. When production of the Model T stopped in 1927 Ford Motor Company A/S cancelled all collective agreements with the Danish trade unions. This radical move was taken under strict orders from Headquarters in Dearborn and was in accordance with the general Ford policy of fighting against the Trade Unions with all means. The Danish management was now forced to abstain from any collective bargaining and refused to renegotiate any of the collective agreements with the trade unions. Instead they should accept that every worker made an individual contract with the management. Unofficially the management was willing to pay the same high wages as earlier. But only on the condition that every worker would sign the new set of factory rules dictated by Ford. Even though it was against all their principles four out of the five trade unions in the factory agreed to let their members sign the new set of factory rules with reference to the high wages the Company was paying. The Saddle makers Union was dominated by the communists and tried to organize a strike but had to give up after a couple of weeks. The social democratic labor unions were swift to appropriate Fordism both as an ideology of consumerism and as an industrial system of rationalization. By means of hard and soft power the Danish workers accepted to let their trade Americanize without putting up any further resistance accepting the carrot as well as the stick.<sup>10</sup>

The massive and omnipotent presence of Ford Motor Company A/S in Denmark and the close relations they kept to the Social Democratic Party makes it very hard to decide if Fordism was the main source to the Americanization of the Danish labor movement. As Mel van Elteren has pointed out the most important site for the discussion of Americanization and rationalization was Weimar Germany. Traditionally the Danish labor movement (the party and the unions taken together) had kept very intimate relations and strong ties to the German Socialdemocrats in SPD, so this could also be the main motive force to shift the political focus from workers control over to consumerism and fighting for the rising standard of living. But as Melteren also points out, Fordism was in many ways a specification of the technological and economical aspects of Americanism, so perhaps the two forces were reinforcing each other.<sup>11</sup>

### Creating a cultural context to the Ford model T

Apart from pushing Fordism very hard in Denmark Ford Motor Company also domesticated the Model T by conversion. Typical of this was presenting the car in a Danish context in advertisements in the MOTOR magazine and the daily newspaper showing pictures of the automobile touring a

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<sup>9</sup> *Ford Nyheder*, no. 11, 1926. In Heimdalsgade the maximum output of cars had been 140 per day. With the new "most modern and rational factory in Europe" the daily output jumped to 225 cars (the record for one day was 253 cars).

<sup>10</sup> Knud Knudsen: *Arbejdskonflikternes Historie i Danmark*. Viborg, 1999, p. 248-5; Kampen om Samlebåndet. Rationalisering og arbejderbevægelse i Danmark i 1920'erne. *Den jyske Historiker*, 35-36, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Mel van Elteren: Op. Cit. p. 23-24.

typical Danish rural landscape and visiting sights of national historical importance. When car no. 100.000 rolled off the assembly line in Copenhagen in 1926 it was wrapped in Dannebrog (the National flag) and sent out touring the country nationwide. When the American camping craze hit the nation by the late 1920'ies the Model T suddenly was displayed as the ultimate vehicle for the camping trip creating a pull effect from the consumers. At many different levels Ford Model T was converted into an icon of everyday life during the second half of the 1920ies.

The stick and the carrot, the hard and the soft power, the push from producers and the pull from consumers were very efficient mechanisms in this successful process of Americanizing the Danish automobile culture done by Ford during the interwar period. As a result of this process of Americanization more than 50% of the 100.000 automobiles registered for private use in the country by 1938 was a Ford Model.



*Integrating the Ford into everyday life. Here it's the load test of the Limfjords Bridge 22. March 1933 was done with 48 Ford Model A trucks loaded with gravel*